

Closed talks with EPA worry Libby

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HELENA — A private meeting set this week between top U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and W.R. Grace and Co. officials is raising the hackles of Libby residents, who fear the company might adversely influence their fate.

W.R. Grace executives will meet with EPA brass Thursday in Washington, D.C., to discuss a regional EPA proposal to declare a public health emergency in Libby which could, for the first time, mark Grace's once-popular Zonolite insulation as a hazardous product. Such a label carries potentially expensive national implications, as estimates say anywhere from 800,000 to 15 million homes nationwide are insulated with Zonolite, which Grace stopped selling in 1980.

Les Skramstad, a Libby asbestos victim, said he's appalled that the public won't be allowed into the meeting at EPA headquarters and he doesn't trust what might happen between the company and the Bush administration.

"I think it's a dirty underhanded thing to do, not only to us in Libby, but probably to everybody on the planet," said Skramstad. "It's unforgivable."

If the meeting were open to the public, said Skramstad, "At least it would be aboveboard. It wouldn't be so sneaky."

Gayla Benefield, a victims' advocate in Libby, said Libby's asbestos sufferers have seen too many private dealings between Grace and government officials in years past.

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intends to listen to the company's concerns.

The intent of the proposed public health emergency declaration is to allow the EPA to remove Zonolite from Libby homes as part of its asbestos cleanup efforts. The declaration would essentially mark Libby's as a special case, but the Bush administration will have to decide whether to take the leap of labeling Zonolite as dangerous.

"We need to hear their side of the story," said Bill Corcoran, W.R. Grace and Co. vice president for public and regulatory affairs. "I don't think anybody's heard it yet." Corcoran said Grace officials asked for the meeting. "So we could understand the science and understand some of the things we are reading in the press."

Tom Scheckells, director of the EPA headquarter's response center that oversees the region that includes Montana, said he wants to reassure the people of Libby that the meeting on Thursday is not one in which the agency intends to make an under-the-table deal with Grace.

"It's anything but a small meeting where Grace could come in and try to sway the day with one person in headquarters," said Scheckells. "Still, Scheckells talked when

asked if a reporter could listen in on the meeting.

"No, I don't think that would be appropriate," he said. "This is not anything extraordinary," Scheckells added.

"Generally, when a responsible party, a stakeholder, asks for a meeting with the agency, we will meet with them."

Several EPA officers will be at the meeting, and the regional officials who deal directly with Libby and wrote the emergency proposal will attend via telephone. Corcoran said it's likely four officials from

W.R. Grace and Co. will be there as well.

Late last month, Gov. Judy Martz announced her support to fast-track the EPA's listing of Libby and the old vermiculite mine as Superfund sites. In her letter, the Republican governor

specifically asked for a firm timeline on the cleanup of no more than three years.

Removing Zonolite from an estimated 800 or so homes and buildings in Libby would likely be a major part of the cleanup, if the emergency declaration wins approval. Officials have estimated the cost of removing Zonolite could range from \$3,000 to \$20,000 per building, depending on the extent of contamination.

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